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UNIVERSITY OF  
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# Constructing the Realm of the Possible: Managerial Talk on Technology-facilitated Violence in Social Services

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# Aims and objectives

- Social service organizations increasingly face new and digitally mediated forms of violence and harm
- This calls for managers to make sense of and respond to phenomena that are operationally complex and normatively ambiguous
- Strategic discourse provides a critical site through which managers construct the realm of organizational responses to such challenges



# Theoretical and conceptual frame

## Technology Facilitated Client Violence

Intentional threats or assaults – single or repeated – carried out through information and communication technologies and directed at workers and/or their family members by service users, their relatives, or acquaintances in connection with service provision (ILO, 2019; Munobwa et al., 2023)



# Theoretical and conceptual frame

- Positioning theory (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999; Mcvee et al., 2024)
  - Human action as situated within overlapping moral orders
- The realm of the possible (Van Langenhove, 2021)
  - Capacities, restrictions, and intentions
- Discourse of possibilities (Boyd et al., 2019)
  - Possibility spaces



**“Possibility work”**



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# Empirical context and RQ's

- 18 interviews with managers working in human service organizations
  - Individual interviews and focus group interviews
- 1. How do managers construct and negotiate a possibility space for organizational responses to digital forms of violence and harm in human service settings?
- 2. How they position themselves, their employees, and their organizations in doing so?
- Discursive positioning analysis and dialogic discourse analysis



# Findings

## 1. The discursive construction of possibility work

- S&R language: speculations, justifications, contrasts, conditional, causalities
- Connect episodes, textual episodes, reasoning episodes, conflictive episodes

## 2. Possibility work involves

- Mapping of potential threats
- Identifying and prioritising scenarios
- Constructing conditions, protocols, and actions for controlling uncertainty
- Psychosocial protection of employees



# Findings

Storyline	Core focus	Positioning of actors	Form of possibility work	Resulting possibility space
<b>Constraining</b>	Delimiting what can and may be done	<p><b>Employeees:</b> exposed and expected to tolerate certain forms of abuse</p> <p><b>Clients:</b> unpredictable, potentially escalating actors</p> <p><b>Organisation:</b> dependent on legal frameworks, partially constrained</p>	Defining thresholds of actionability; invoking juridical limits; normalising some harms while escalating others	Narrowed and selective: only specific forms of violence become actionable; other harms fall outside organisational response
<b>Enabling</b>	Sustaining the capacity to act under complex conditions	<p><b>Employeees:</b> authorised agents within structured procedures</p> <p><b>Clients:</b> strategic actors operating across multiple domains</p> <p><b>Organisation:</b> boundary-setting and regulating actor</p>	Structuring action through procedures; regulating interaction; maintaining control through institutional boundaries	Conditionally open: action remains possible, but only within tightly defined organisational frameworks
<b>Stabilising</b>	Maintaining organisational orientation and continuity	<p><b>Employeees:</b> entitled to protection in defined cases</p> <p><b>Clients:</b> subject to normative limits of acceptable behaviour</p> <p><b>Organisation:</b> responsible actor with clear duties</p>	Fixing normative thresholds (e.g. zero tolerance); reaffirming procedural norms; anchoring expectations	Stabilised and predictable: certain responses become obligatory and taken-for-granted

# Findings

- The discourse of possibilities of the managers functions as a strategic arena in which resources are mobilised (capacities), normative boundaries are navigated (restrictions) and future aims are projected (intentions)
- This triad makes uncertainty manageable, and this is achieved through possibility work: capacities are tied with conditions, restrictions are identified and accepted, intentions aim towards addressing institutional gaps (see also Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Weick, 1996; Garud & Karnoe, 2001)
- Simultaneously the S&R discourse indexes and maintains a dialogical possibility space, in which organisations can test and institutionalise their reactions



# Conclusions and discussion

- We offer a framework for examining strategy talks as a moral and discursive practice through which uncertainty is managed, agency is negotiated, and the realm of the possible is dynamically shaped
- Possibility work shapes action before it happens
- Positions actors differently:
  - Employees, clients, and organisations are given different rights and duties
- Managing these issues is not only about rules and interventions, but about how organisations define what counts as a problem, what should be acted upon, and what should be tolerated





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**Thank you!**



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